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Military Studies Alternatives to Shuttle

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 — Military officials today began studying alternative ways of delivering their satellites into orbit as a result of the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger.

Pentagon officials and private analysts said they expected a delay of six months or more in the shuttle schedule because of the accident, which could require the military to force civilian cargo off some future shuttles once the flights resume.

The officials predicted that the explosion Tuesday would also result in Air Force requests for more rockets to put military satellites into orbit.

The military had booked space on four shuttle flights this year for, among other things, launching of the newest Air Force intelligence satellite and of a pair of advanced military communications satellites, according to private analysts. The shuttle program is operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

42 Air Force Rockets

Air Force officials said today that they were studying whether any of those satellites could be launched by unmanned booster rockets. Since the shuttle came into service in 1981 the Air Force has continued to launch some of its smaller satellites with rockets. Officials said the Air Force had 42 booster rockets on hand.

These rockets range from Titan 34D models capable of lifting 10,000 pounds, to smaller Scout rockets used to lift small satellites into low orbits.

But the officials said it would require expensive modifications to refit some satellites for rocket launching. Moreover, according to Air Force testimony to Congress, at least one military satellite, the KH-12 intelligence satellite scheduled for a shuttle mission in September, is probably too heavy to be boosted into space by existing rockets.

The first military shuttle mission this year, scheduled for July, was to include an Air Force experiment designed to test the ability to track aircraft from outer space.

Military Support to Continue

That launching, the first from a new facility for military shuttle launchings at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, was also scheduled to carry Under Secretary of the Air Force Edward C. Aldridge into space.

Donald C. Latham, the Assistant Secretary of Defense in charge of command, communications and intelligence-gathering satellites, said in an interview today that regardless of the Challenger mishap, the Defense Department would not abandon its role as the financial mainstay of the shuttle.

Under a directive signed by President Reagan last February the Air Force has promised to occupy at least eight of the 24 shuttle flights each year beginning in 1988, with the prospect that the antimissile research program would buy additional shuttle space.

"The Department of Defense is the biggest customer and always has been," he said, "and that's not going to change."

Mr. Latham declined to speculate on whether to Air Force would favor production of a new shuttle to replace the one that exploded Tuesday.

Capacity of Remaining Craft

Brig. Gen. Donald J. Kutyna, the Air Force director of space systems, said in an interview that the Air Force and NASA were completing a study to show whether the space agency could meet its goal of 24 missions a year with its three remaining orbiters. He said it ap-

peared that three orbiters could handle the scheduled military missions, but only by pre-empting many commercial and scientific missions.

The military has authority to claim priority for its cargo on the basis of national security, but has never used it.

There was wide agreement in and out of the Pentagon that Tuesday's accident may lead the Air Force to push for an expansion of its plan, recently approved by Congress, to spend \$2 billion on new rockets.

Under the program, the Air Force has authority to buy 10 "complementary expendable launch vehicles" to be used, two a year beginning in 1988, for satellites that must be launched on a precise schedule.

Gen. Kutyna said he had been assigned to examine whether the new rocket program should be enlarged.

Security Risk Predicted

Air Force officials said in Congressional testimony last year that reliance on the shuttle alone was "an unacceptable national security risk" because the shuttle schedule may not be dependable enough for urgent military payloads, and that manned vehicles

might be grounded in times of crisis because of the risk of attack.

The recently declassified testimony before a House Appropriations subcommittee shows that Air Force representatives said that once the shuttle achieved its full schedule of 24 flights a year in 1988, a six-month delay could throw the schedule off by two years.

"Should one orbiter be permanently disabled, we would never catch up," the service said.

Air Force officials have also complained in private that the civilian space agency cannot always provide the secrecy they would like for some military cargo.

Shuttle supporters in Congress have charged that the Air Force is also motivated by a desire for control of space operations, and that its alternative plans would siphon money from the shuttle program.

The military has played an increasing role in financing and management of the shuttle program and in research into its future. But many in the military have remained cool to the shuttle program because of its predominantly nonmilitary orientation.